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STYLE IN SHAKESPEARE

by

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Fellow of the Academy

ANNUAL SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

of the

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I

ANY one who tries to speak at large upon this subject must feel soon dashed, and a little o'er-parted, like Sir Nathaniel in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Shakespeare has not one style, but many. We might think them the work of several different authors—if we did not know better.) There is his own, in his narrative poems and sonnets; and there are all the voices, the individual voices, of the great invented population. What is there left, or rather what is there not left, to say about them? Can we, with any profit, begin to classify these styles, according to the speakers that use them, the occasions that beget them, the stagecraft that requires them? Have they any definite history visible, as the dramatist's power expands? Science and scholarship, of course, have begun to furnish answers to such questions. I will not try to recount here the benefactors¹—lexicographers, grammarians, metrists, editors, biographers—to whom we are in debt; and am not pretending to add one stone to that pyramid of lore; in these precincts, it is enough to salute it in passing. (The normal playgoer, the unprofessional reader, is hardly aware of its magnitude) or he might simply be daunted; he might begin to doubt the truth of a saying of Miss Ellen Terry, which is rather in the vein of her delightful Beatrice, by some few of us still so well remembered: 'Coroners' inquests cannot make Shakespeare into a dead man.' That is true—if not quite as the speaker meant it. These learned operations do not kill Shakespeare; no, they quicken him for us beyond measure. (We can begin, in the schoolboy's sense, to construe him,

that is, to know better what his words meant to his first hearers; to realize the vast store of them, it is said some 20,000, which he uses; and how he dragged out many a word, phrase, or usage from literary or common speech, sometimes from the grosser underworld of language, and has passed many a one into our common parlance; how even his commonest terms often have a shade of meaning which now is lost, and which, not without stiff application, we must try to grasp.) Everything has been analysed for our benefit; his grammar, his compounds, his proverbs, his use of slang and dialects, and his oaths. The metrists have been no less active; their labours have been prodigious. His versification² has been studied statistically; although, in the nature of the case, the findings, where so much depends on the ear, cannot always agree. His rhymed, his lengthened, his shortened lines have been tabled in terms of percentages; also the lines that are 'split' between two speakers, and those which end on so weak an accent that the voice is more or less forbidden to pause. It is all indispensable evidence. (The actuarial study of metre, and to some extent of language, is, to begin with, a supplement in aid of that bedrock problem, the approximate, the partly conjectured, order of the plays.)

Still, all this science (and of textual science I am saying nothing) has been less often used to illuminate Shakespeare's artistic mastery of language and rhythm; and to-day I can only offer stray notes on that immense question. My illustrations will be taken largely from plays written before 1600. I would touch upon his style, not in its constituent atoms, the word or the foot, but regarded rather as the product of the characters, the passions, the situations, which in fact are the living, the driving forces behind and *determining* the style.

II

(The critics of a century ago (they are still our greatest critics) had next to no science, and yet they went deep.

Coleridge and Hazlitt were chiefly bent on praising the poet's inspiration and his judgement and with reading, or reading into, his *dramatis personae*; they also had inspired flashes when they spoke of his verbal and dramatic craft. What can be better than De Quincey's account of his method in dialogue? It touches on the living nerve that links the changing emotion of the speakers with the figures of speech that lie dead before us in the grammars. I shall follow it with a familiar example.)

! Every form of natural interruption, breaking through the restraints of ceremony under the impulses of tempestuous passion; every form of hasty interrogative, ardent reiteration when a question has been evaded; every form of hostile repetition of the hostile words; every impatient continuation of the hostile statement; in short, all modes and formulae by which anger, hurry, fretfulness, scorn, impatience, or excitement under any movement whatever, can disturb or modify the formal bookish style of commencement—these are as rife in Shakespeare's dialogue as in life itself.)

Cas. I said, an elder soldier, not a better:
Did I say 'better'?

Bru. If you did, I care not.

Cas. When Caesar lived, he durst not thus have moved me.

Bru. Peace, peace! you durst not so have tempted him.

Cas. I durst not!

Bru. No.

Cas. What! durst not tempt him!

Bru. For your life you durst not.

Cas. Do not presume too much upon my love;

I may do that I shall be sorry for. j

Later interpreters, who were also scholars, such as the honoured Edward Dowden and Andrew Bradley,³ spoke with much nicety on Shakespeare's form; but they too were more concerned with penetrating his characters, or his philosophy of life. To-day the gap between hard learning and artistic comment continues to be filled. Fresh in mind is the service of Miss Caroline Spurgeon, with her ordered account of *Shakespeare's Imagery*;⁴ and nearer still to the scene in which he moved and had his being are

the *Prefaces* of Mr. Granville Barker, which illuminate the value of the poet's words, and sounds, and silences, as heard in the theatre, and the indivisible tie between the imaginary speaker's nature and his utterance.

What, then, to borrow a term from our President, is the right 'approach' to the study of the poet's style, of his many styles? The siege, plainly, must be made from two sides. We must, with all the aids of science, work upward from the word, and from the unit of rhythm; but also downward, starting from the conception, the character, and the situation. Words and measures are after all only the artist's material; what is it that *directs* his choice and use of them? We may assume that in the inventive process of drama the words, at any rate, do not come first. Sometimes they may do so, and may tempt the poet to place them with only a show of plausibility; it may be so when he bestows the sublime lines on the heavenly orbs and their patines of bright gold upon a rather ordinary young eloping Venetian who is sitting out under their light.' But as a rule the story comes first; the story that Shakespeare, as we know, took from where he would and shaped as he would; and then come the situations; people acting, suffering, moving and pausing, clashing and interacting. 'Persons influence us', says Cardinal Newman, 'voices melt us . . . deeds inflame us'; and so it is in the mental theatre of the dramatist. *They* decide the language and shape the harmonies.' It is for us to start, if we can, with his men and women, and with their plight of embroiling circumstance, and then to listen for their voices; so following, however afar off, the order of invention. If this seem self-evident, let it pass for a line of approach, not always followed.

One other submission I shall make in passing, though it does not admit of direct proof; namely, that¹ Shakespeare was a far more conscious and deliberate craftsman in words and sounds than is sometimes admitted. However fast he may have written, nay often must have written; however rare or disputed may be the evidence for his revision of

his text; however little he may have cared to blot, and however much he may have suffered for it; yet, a hundred times over, 'we cannot think of his perfection in style as just instinctive or spontaneous. It can have all the effect of calculated art. He did not use our pedantic terms; but when he wrote 'the multitudinous seas incarnadine', or the Clown's picture in *Twelfth Night* of Malvolio's prison, that it 'hath bay windows transparent as barricadoes, and the clearstores toward the south north are as lustrous as ebony'—did he not study every syllable like a connoisseur?' But I will leave the rest of my quotations to-day to enforce this plea.

III

'In fact, we can glean something about Shakespeare's own tastes and dislikes in the matter of style. In the Sonnets he speaks for himself; but the words of his personages, too, are often stamped with his clear approval, and it seems fair to quote them. We feel this when Portia discourses on the quality of mercy; where the poet, as so often, is a deliberate and even obtrusive moralizer; and why not also when he speaks of language? Indeed, good style in his eyes approaches to a moral quality, twice blest. Most of all, he seems to prize simplicity in expression, as in character.† The word 'simple', no doubt, often meant foolish or rustically naïve; but not so when Juliet calls true love acted simple modesty; and we hear of simple faith, or of truth's simplicity. For language, the favourite word is 'plain', in nearly the same sense. Before Claudio, in *Much Ado*, was in love, he would 'speak plain and to the purpose, like an honest man and a soldier'. The Sonnets contrast the poet's 'true plain words' with the 'gross painting' used by others.‡ He abjures 'what strained touches rhetoric can lend', also 'new-found methods and compounds strange'; although, indeed, Shakespeare abounds in these himself.) The song 'Come away, come away, death', is called 'old and plain', and 'silly-sooth',

or truth unsophisticated. (Amiens commends the Duke's praises of the woodland life in Arden, they have been expressed in 'so quiet and so sweet a style'—an obvious motto for the play itself. Rosalind speaks of Phebe's letter as in a 'boisterous and a cruel style'; and the poet, looking back, may or may not have thought how often this term had been applicable to his own *Richard III*. The word 'phrase' is often contemptuous, especially in *Hamlet*. We hear of a vile phrase, or a grandsire phrase. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Pandarus says, 'My business seethes'; to which a Servant replies, 'Sodden business! there's a stewed phrase indeed!'. Justice Shallow commends 'good phrases', when Bardolph has observed that 'a soldier is better accommodated than with a wife'. 'It comes of *accommodo*; very good; a good phrase.' All this points to a distaste for artifice in speech, and is akin to Hamlet's advice on elocution to the players. Yet Shakespeare also values magnificence; he envies, in the rival poet, the 'proud full sail of his great verse'. It might be a good description of his own verse when he begins, as his habit is, an English history play with an organ-note:

So shaken as we are, so wan with care,
Find we a time for frightened peace to pant
And breathe short-winded accents of new broils
To be commenced in stronds afar remote.

- (In the Sonnets, again, style, in the sense of something rich and strange and elaborate, written with a 'golden quill', and in 'precious phrase by all the Muses filled', is spoken of as something outside Shakespeare's own range. The beloved youth will not get that from *him*; but will say, making his comparisons, 'Theirs for their style I'll read, his for his love'. And there are yet other references to beauty of diction. Holofernes is not himself a simple speaker; but he admires, in a famous phrase, 'the elegance, facility, and golden cadence of poesy'); and he is thinking of a poet who counts for something in Shakespeare's narratives:

Ovidius Naso was the man; and why, indeed, Naso, but for smelling out the odoriferous flowers of fancy, the jerks of invention?

Put these two passages together and we begin to have a just criticism of *Venus and Adonis*. Before passing on let me mention a valuable paper by Miss G. D. Willcock on *Shakespeare as Critic of Language*;⁵ it throws light on the changes which, during his youth, came over speech and literary taste. *Love's Labour's Lost*, in which those changes are described as 'the dominant theme', furnishes an excellent text, on which I am thus dispensed from dwelling.

IV

Shakespeare's hints thus tell us something of his preferences, though naturally they do not suggest half the glories, or all the drawbacks, of his style. (But there are many other signs of his distaste for artificial speech, and also of his skill in constructing it for the dramatic purpose. False style of many kinds, and betraying many motives, is as abundant in his plays as in real life. It may be the jargon of vanity, like that of the Poet in *Timon of Athens*. The manner may be literary and topical; when Pistol rants about the 'pampered jades of Asia', Marlowe's phrase is still fresh in the memory of the theatre. So, too, with the bombast of the inserted plays in *Hamlet*; and that drama is the great hunting-ground for specimens of unreal style, for five at least of the characters drop into it. Hamlet himself, in his 'antic disposition', or genuine distraction—as in his wrangle with Laertes in Ophelia's grave (that barbarous business)—exactly disobeys his own counsel to the players to observe the modesty of nature: a counsel which we all take as Shakespeare's own. Hamlet is a great verbal critic; he has the sharpest of ears for affectation; he mocks and mimics Osric, a being who *is* nothing more than the words he speaks—and these are nothing.) Hamlet plays with his old mates the two courtiers, one-dimensional creatures, who have their own spurious court idiom. But

in the public speech of Claudius there is the darker shade of falsity; just as in the professions of Cordelia's sisters, or in the extravagance of Macbeth's imagery, when the murder has come out and he must needs put a face upon it;

Here lay Duncan,
His silver skin laced with his golden blood.

But here there is a further refinement; for the memory of his real terror at the sight of his handiwork comes back to Macbeth, and also, for the moment, gives to his histrionics the required thrill of sincerity. If we ever feel that these devices are all too palpable, and that Shakespeare forces the note, we remember that they are in the nature of directions to the actor, and also that he had to make them 'carry' to the farthest ends of the house, and to the simplest spectator. But in one personage, who might plausibly be called Shakespeare's greatest stylist, such emphasis would have been inartistic. (The words of Iago must not bear on their face the stamp of falsity; we are far indeed from Richard Crookback, whose victims seem to us so foolish. In soliloquy Iago can be plain and brutal, nay almost flat; but when he joins in the dialogue, in verse or prose, what a virtuoso of language!) How he enjoys it for its own sake, and rolls it on his tongue! He is more than blunt or bluff, as befits the honest man; in his allocution to Roderigo he is a natural orator; repeating, and spacing out, his almost lyrical refrain, 'put money in thy purse', like Shylock with 'let him look to his bond'; dwelling on long or unusual words and on their cadence, 'perdurable', 'sequestration', 'supersubtle', 'sanctimony'; and he even turns euphuist, somewhat late in the day, with his balanced clauses and his allusion to a polysyllabic vegetable:

These Moors are changeable in their wills:—fill thy purse with money:—the food that to him now is luscious as locusts, shall be to him shortly as bitter as coloquintida.

I must not speak of the actor's contribution to the effect;

but merely to read the colloquy with Othello is to feel how the words 'Honest, my lord!', 'Think, my lord!', and the rest, are economized, dropping in minims from the vial; and how the climax comes in the mock oath, so terribly near to real poetry:

Witness, you ever-burning lights above,
You elements that clip us round about,
Witness that here Iago doth give up
The execution of his wit, hands, heart,
To wrong'd Othello's service.

Does the poet here give a hint of artifice, by this somewhat archaic, Marlowe-like use of the third persons, the names, in mock solemnity?

All such effects suggest anything but careless ease in composition. As to the poet's precepts of plainness, simplicity, and directness, it is clear that he did not always practise them; I mean, of course, not only that he can be rich and magnificent, with all the glories of his imagery, at any moment and for whole scenes on end, but that he can, notoriously, write in a complex and embarrassed style, which must have been difficult for his own audience, and which sometimes has, and sometimes has not, a dramatic aim and justification. To this feature of his later tragedies I must return; but meantime we can point to certain occasions on which it is Shakespeare's habit, first and last, to revert to simplicity, even to bareness; and this not least in the plays that abound in ravelled language. Simplicity, on its negative side, is but the removal of barriers between mind and mind, between heart and heart; and it is usually present at the important moments of the drama; at the great crises, in the great farewells, and in the great reconciliations. These utterances *have* to be plain, if they are to 'carry' far, and everywhere, and immediately. Macbeth's 'I am settled', Othello's 'All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven', Hamlet's 'The rest is silence'—the examples crowd upon us, like Imogen's 'Why did you throw your wedded lady from you?'

V

One other trait has often been dwelt upon: that women's speech in Shakespeare, as in life, is as a rule straighter, plainer, less figured and literary, than the speech of men. De Quincey,⁶ in his essay on 'Style', remarks that 'the educated women of Great Britain . . . are the true and best depositaries of the old mother idiom'; and further, in words that bring us back to Hermione and Desdemona, that

No woman in this world, under a movement of resentment from a false accusation, or from jealousy, or from confidence betrayed, ever was at leisure to practise vagaries of caprice in the management of her mother tongue: strength of real feeling shuts out all temptation to the affectation of false feeling.

The words apply best to tragedy or tragi-comedy; we think of Imogen's

False to his bed! what is it to be false?
To lie in watch there and to think on him?
To weep 'twixt clock and clock?

But in comedy the speech of Shakespeare's ladies need not be so simple. Beatrice, an enjoyer of language, abounds in figure and verbal subtlety; her prose has a distinct, almost a scannable, cadence of its own, which is unlike that of Rosalind; while that of Portia, talking with Nerissa, is patterned, with its balance and hunting of the letter, upon the still familiar style of euphuism.⁷)

The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree: such a hare is madness the youth, to skip o'er the meshes of good counsel the cripple . . . so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father.

Students have shown how Shakespeare, that gay borrower, almost to the last liked to echo John Lyly's tune or to inlay his phrases; and how, throughout, his prose profited by the discipline. Long afterwards, unexpectedly, we come on Goldsmith praising Lyly's writing as 'a kind of prodigy of neatness, clearness, and precision'.

The complex Helena in *All's Well*, the only thinker amongst Shakespeare's women, the self-analyst, has many and divers tones; some of their variety may well be due to the rehandling of the play. A creature of reason and will, she concentrates both on a purpose that is deeper rooted than reason; and the smallest acquaintance with life forbids us to marvel at her choice of a Bertram. Yet she holds her feeling, as if at arm's length, and watches it, even in public. As her reward for curing the king she has to pick her husband from the company of young nobles. Her speech is no mere conceit, it is gravely uttered:

Please it your majesty, I have done already;
The blushes in my cheeks thus whisper me,
'We blush that thou shouldst choose; but, be refused,
Let the white death sit on thy cheek for ever;
We'll ne'er come there again.'

Simple the language is, but not so the idea; the blushes, which are real enough and honest, have voices; and we think how, at moments of tension, Shakespeare ever loves to personify. His vision of Helena's introspective nature dictates the peculiar figure. The climactic image,

Let the white death sit on thy cheek for ever,

with its rise and fall of sound and hardly definable image, projects that image before her as in a mirror. The three emphatic words in the centre of it form, in Browning's phrase, not a fourth word, but a star. Here again is the effect, if not the result, of studious art.

VI

But to glance, however hastily, at the general course of Shakespeare's style. Only a few bearings can be taken here, and whole regions of the map must be left out. I will say little of the narrative poems; he had already commenced dramatist, and they are in a sense a by-product. Some of the sonnets, to judge by their ruling idea, seem to be of the same date. (*Venus and Adonis* and the *Rape of Lucrece* are

in a fashion of the hour; in the Ovidian, Italianate, decorative manner which Marlowe had practised and which Drayton and others were to follow. With their want of shape, their squandering of power, and their numberless false notes, and with their energy and melody and recurrent magnificence, they disclose not only a common form but a common cult. It is the cult of beauty; and primarily, of the beauty of youth in man and woman. The temper is that of the artist, grouping and posing his models from the life, with the professional intentness, the emotional detachment, of the studio. He may stop awhile to admire and animate his Adonis: 'Pure shame and awed resistance made him fret, Which bred more beauty in his angry eyes'. But the poet turns aside, puts more heart into his sketch of a hunted hare, and, in general, seems to be not greatly moved. Nor is every reader, for though the imagery be hot and sensuous enough, the fire, to invert Milton's phrase, performs the effect of cold. This may be why the poem (I think the remark is Andrew Bradley's) does not, like *Hero and Leander*, satisfy the imagination. The sense of beauty in Shakespeare, and his expression of it, is a topic that would lead far afield indeed, into the world of Spenser, and of the English Renaissance and beyond; and back again to the English landscape, and to Perdita, and to the magic island. (In Shakespeare's plays 'loveliness in favour', in woman or man, is seen usually as no separate gift but as the crown of many attributes, race and breeding, wit or valour: a thoroughly aristocratic conception.) Troilus, as pictured by Pandarus, is very like the adored youth of the sonnets:

Have you any eyes? do you know what a man is? Is not birth, beauty, good shape, discourse, manhood, learning, gentleness, virtue, youth, liberality, and such like, the spice and salt that season a man?

For a sketch like this I need not draw upon plays in which Shakespeare's share can reasonably be contested. The verse of the three early comedies, somewhat thin yet sweet

and regular, like 'the current that with gentle murmur glides', still reveals, once or twice in each of them, that the true Shakespeare has arrived. Most of the persons are but delicate sketches, or types; yet the force of the situation, at times, brings them to life and endows them with a music that is new in English poetry. In the *Comedy of Errors*, perhaps the earliest of the group, there are the complaints of the jealous Adriana, and of the old Egeon who supposes that he has been disowned to his face by his own son. His outcry might be too piercing for so light a play if we did not know that presently all will be well. (The style—of the kind that comes to sustained perfection in the *Dream*—is of the purest; and the verse, though still, and for long afterwards, moving within the bounds of the self-enclosed line, still often runs over freely, the whole period being spoken almost in a breath.)

Not know my voice! O time's extremity,
Hast thou so crack'd and splitted my poor tongue
In seven short years, that here my only son
Knows not my feeble key of untuned cares?
Though now this grainèd face of mine be hid
In sap-consuming winter's drizzled snow
And all the conduits of my blood froze up,
Yet hath my night of life some memory,
My wasting lamps some fading glimmer left,
My dull deaf ears a little use to hear:
All these old witnesses—I cannot err—
Tell me thou art my son Antipholus.

VII

Soon and rather suddenly, with Mercutio and Bottom and Portia, the great population grows, and with it the voices, ever more distinctive, multiply. Figures appear like Puck and Shylock, one of them a world-figure and a proverb, who like Falstaff have given adjectives to the dictionary. There are still the fainter types, the Lysanders and Salarinos, often presented in pairs, who keep the action moving and whom the playwright, not without a hint or

two, leaves it to the players to distinguish. (The main stream of verse-language, in *Romeo and Juliet* often turbid, runs clear, if not always deep, in the *Dream* and the *Merchant of Venice*; for there is no reason for it to be troubled—except once. There is no serious clash of persons or of passions in fairyland, or at Belmont. Only the speech of Shylock, and above all his shattering prose ('Hath not a Jew eyes? . . .'), strikes into the world of wit and grace, of nobles and gentry and defaulters; it would kill any meaner comedy; and for energy of soul and fullness of cadence there is nothing like it in Shakespeare's prose until he thinks of Hamlet.) It is needless to recite the riches of the lyrical imagery, rhymed or unrhymed; Miss Spurgeon has brought out for us its profusion in the *Dream*; where, as in certain scenes in Venice, the action passes under the presiding moon and stars. The shiftings between verse and prose, and between rhymed heroics and blank verse and song, are more nicely than ever yet enlisted, in order to express a heightening or lowering of mood, be it in the scene or in the speaker. Rhyme, which the poet was to use less and less except for special purposes, and which Swinburne rashly called his 'evil angel', has many dramatic virtues. It adds to the slow gravity of Friar Laurence, choosing amongst his herbs. In the wood near Athens, it gives the formal effect of an old English square dance, as the four lovers, all much of one pattern, change partners. Every one feels the note of solemnity and ritual in the rhymes, running into stanza, in the meeting of Romeo and Juliet; and also at their parting, where they are sprinkled in with a note of omen:

Jul. O, now be gone; more light and light it grows;

Rom. More light and light; more dark and dark our woes.

Many new kinds of language now appear, ever more individual; in the fairies and rustics, in the Jew, in Mercutio and the Nurse. We begin to come on the almost unnoticed touches by which a character, with its memories, its past that is outside the play, is lit up in a few plain words. The

verse is only just above the pitch of prose in a certain parenthesis of Juliet's Nurse, when she says of her mistress that

Come Lammas-eve at night shall she be fourteen.
Susan and she—God rest all Christian souls!—
Were of an age: well, Susan is with God;
She was too good for me:—but, as I said,
On Lammas-eve at night shall she be fourteen.

My memory of Mrs. Stirling, in the old Lyceum, is that here she lowered her voice, spoke absently, and crossed herself. Who was Susan? We know enough. Also in this group of plays the pulse rises with the increase of song or recitative; the *Dream* ends, like *Comus*, in a run of short and happy rhymes, the wedding blessing of the sprites upon the mortals. For some years, while making his chronicle plays, Shakespeare had little occasion to sing, being busy with his orators. Nor did he, for long, fulfil the promise of high disquisition in verse, which is given by the defence of poesy and imagination, assigned to Theseus: a defence, also, by the playwright, of the play itself, where 'cool reason' is in abeyance.

VIII

{ There is less variety of accent in the history plays that begin with *Richard III*. Here presides a new sort of rhetoric, which in that tragedy is loud and monotonous for all its splendours; while in *Richard II* it is subtler, full of images drawn out fine as spider's webs, and of wonderful exercises in melody. The self-pitying king, the only king in Shakespeare who is presented as *consciously* a poet, seems to infect the other speakers, even his gardener, with his habit of speech; which is with him even while he is being stabbed. Almost every one who speaks verse in these Histories is an orator, even in soliloquy.) Now begin the grand unfolding of the colours, the fanfare of the vowels, the march of plea and counterplea, in entreaty or invective or self-excuse. The speeches of royalty become ever longer;

thirty, forty lines on end. The three in the 'crowning scene' in *Henry IV* reveal, by a new method of presenting character, the whole nature, the pent-up painful confidences, of the father and son. But they are not too long, they rise superbly to a climax. One other trait of these Histories may be noticed. The court and the battlefield, besides the tavern, are their theatre of action; and here there can be no natural scenery before the eyes of the *dramatis personae*; no lark at dawn, no moonlit country-side. Yet the images of nature refuse to be left out; they creep, they throng into the speeches—but now, as part of the speaker's passions or emotions, by way of metaphor, and often of formal simile. The eyes of opposed armies are '*like* the meteors of a troubled heaven'; the Welsh lady's song charms the hearer,

Making such difference 'twixt wake and sleep
As is the difference betwixt day and night
The hour before the heavenly-harness'd team
Begins his golden progress in the east.

In the vext mind of Henry of Lancaster, the images kindle one another⁸ like sparks in a train, and the troubled style of the later tragedies is in sight:

O God! that one might read the book of fate,
And see the revolution of the times
Make mountains level, and the continent,
Weary of solid firmness, melt itself
Into the sea! and, other times, to see
The beachy girdle of the ocean
Too wide for Neptune's hips! how chances mock,
And changes fill the cup of alteration
With divers liquors! O, if this were seen,
The happiest youth, viewing his progress through,
What perils past, what crosses to ensue,
Would shut the book, and sit him down and die.

All things are in flux: the vision of the earth flattened, then melted into the sea, calls up that of the sea itself, with the god straddling neck-high as in the old maps of the *Poly-Olbion*; the image of a liquid persists, but now it is only a

bitter cupful; the abstract words 'revolution', 'alteration', enforce the sense of change; and then the intellect, ceasing to drift on these dreams, pulls itself up, remembers its original image, and closes with the book of fate once more. Such a process of thought can be traced a hundred times afterwards, in the tragedies; indeed Henry the Fourth, with his baffled wish to expiate his offence by a pilgrimage, has the makings of a tragic hero. He is more interesting than his son, who is so often called, and truly, the poet's presentment of a pattern king, a champion of England and also at one in spirit with his people. He, too, in his speech on the idol Ceremony, so much more moving than his public and martial trumpetings, is a master of the magnificent style, with its 'intertissued robe of gold and pearl'; and yet it is less poignant than are the musings of his father. Shakespeare, we may feel, had been waiting to find a language, lofty and above all sustained, that should beseeem a king who was after his own heart; but there was nothing in John, or in the two Richards, that could evoke it. Now he achieves it; and presently, as though he had made the utmost of it, he drops it, with its special pageantry and colouring; and he turns to Rome, and legendary Denmark, and legendary Britain, there to find a dialect for the harsher problems of the will and conscience.

IX

His other achievement, about the turn of the century, in these history plays and the comedies that interlace them, is to create a new prose, for a new world that speaks in prose. Here, as Dr. Johnson said of Charing Cross, we are in the full tide of human existence. As to the graver prose, now so much enriched, and often alternating with verse on the lips of the same speaker, it is found in *Hamlet* and in *Henry the Fifth*, and is no less deeply inspired than their poetry. In the case of Henry, its use is plainly dictated by the fundamental conception of his character.

He talks with his people, with Bates and Williams, in their own language: they do not know who he is:

The king is but a man, as I am: the violet smells to him as it doth to me; the element shows to him as it doth to me; all his senses have but human conditions; his ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness he appears but a man. . . .

The other aspect of man, as he is or may be, 'the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals', is also proclaimed, in Hamlet's, in Shakespeare's, greatest piece of prose. Hamlet says that the picture cannot delight *him*, but plainly it delights Shakespeare. At the other extreme is the speech of Falstaff and his circle; and this continues, somewhat dulled except for the description of his death, in the humours of Nym and Pistol, caricature-types. The mere verbal stores of Falstaff and the peculiar rhetoric of his wit would demand a long description; let me only note the strength of his observing intellect, which comes out best of all in his soliloquies, as in his picture of his ragged regiment, 'the cankers of a calm world and a long peace', the 'tattered prodigals lately come from swine-keeping'. We know, too, of his easy, his profane acquaintance with the language of scripture and the tones of the pulpit, and, at some time in the past, with the 'inside of a church'. Shylock's allusions had been to the Old Testament.

X

I am omitting the 'middle comedies', on which so much could be said for the purpose of my text, in order to touch on two or three features of the great tragedies. Each of them has its own pervading and distinctive style, deriving from the content. But consider the general quality that culminates in their language, the quality of *grandeur*. It is a word not easy to define with any precision; and I will avoid the difficult aesthetic problem that is raised by the kind of grandeur which seems to be almost denuded of beauty—the kind that is abundant in the play of *Coriolanus*.

The veteran critics, Matthew Arnold⁹ and George Saint-

bury,¹⁰ were fond of speaking, though in very different senses, of the 'grand style' in poetry. Matthew Arnold used to hand us passages from Homer, Virgil, or Milton, which we were to keep as touchstones, and which were bound, if we applied them, to show up all inferior metal. He quoted the noblest lines that he could think of; and most of them, as we should expect from him, though not all, have some kind of high ethical suggestion, as in Milton's lines,

Standing on earth, not rapt above the pole,
More safe I sing, with mortal voice, unchang'd
To hoarse or mute, though fall'n on evil days,
On evil days though fall'n, and evil tongues.

This counsel of Matthew Arnold's is not outworn; but we are looking for a particular species, the dramatic species, of the style. Saintsbury, ever more flexible and generous in his admirations and loth to think of any kind of perfection as higher or lower than another, goes to the other extreme, and finds the grand style more easily; in what he calls the 'central splendour of Adriana's speech' in the *Errors*, or in the tirades of Timon. Again we need not quarrel, except to plead that though these things are magnificent, and also dramatic, no word seems to be left for something that is greater yet. I would suggest letting the phrase 'the grand style' take care of itself, and keeping to the noun 'grandeur', which in our usage means something more; and also, in the case of a dramatist, limiting it by the word 'dramatic'. Poetry, in a play, may have philosophical grandeur without being specially dramatic; like the speech of Ulysses on order, or some of the superb Stoical passages in the tragedies of Chapman. But the words of Ajax, though they come in an epic, have dramatic grandeur: 'Slay me, but so it be in the light.' They are referred to by the great critic known as 'Longinus';¹¹ and he insists that the highest effects of style can only be won when they are 'the echo' (or reverberation) 'of a great soul'. Longinus, however, takes most of his instances from non-dramatic verse or from prose oratory. For the quality

we seek, I suggest that the great soul must be speaking at some crisis of its fate, with the whole force of the story behind it and in our mind; be it at the crisis of a conflict or decision, or in the moment when this conflict is resolved and the speaker bids farewell to life, or to all hope in life; and does so in words which alone beseem the occasion. Poetical grandeur is thus the genus, dramatic grandeur the species. This last is hardly present, for instance, in the famed lines of Claudio in *Measure for Measure* on the after-life, 'Aye, but to die, and go we know not where'. True, they are dramatic in so far as Claudio is condemned to die, and is pleading for his life; but there is not the great nature or the strong action, the true dramatic energy, behind them. So, too, with the words of Hotspur, sublime as they are, and the utmost that Shakespeare had so far achieved in this kind. Burke, in his discussion of the 'sublime', argues that one of its characteristics is in some way to suggest infinity; and Hotspur exclaims

But thought's the slave of life, and life time's fool;
And time, that takes survey of all the world,
Must have a stop.

Shakespeare, before he wrote *Julius Caesar*, seldom gives us anything like this, for the good reason that he had thought of no personage sufficiently great, and placed in a situation sufficiently great, to beget such utterance. In the major tragedies, dramatic grandeur, while in a sense pervasive, is most marked in the actual valedictions, Macbeth's 'To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow', and in Othello's 'Soft you; a word or two before you go'. But dramatic grandeur of language need not culminate in a single peak. In *Lear* there is range over range, each one of which we had thought to be the last. Lear is called upon not to decide on action but to realize the truth; and this process is gradual. We can hardly fix on any one moment or acme, unless we choose 'What, have his daughters brought him to this pass?' Perhaps, in *King Lear*, the dramatic grandeur is at its height wherever the expression

of personal suffering is united with the highest metaphysical style; which deals in universals, and is here employed in judgement upon the whole disorder of this impious world: as in the king's invocations to the indifferent gods, or in

Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just.

XI

Julius Caesar, with which the tragic period opens, every one feels to be simply and lucidly composed, and to show what Dowden calls the perfect balance between thought and expression. Deceptively, perhaps, as regards the thought. The play may remind us of the saying, I think of Goethe, that Shakespeare lays character and motive before us like the exposed works of a watch. Yes, but which of us here can understand, though he may behold, the works of a watch? I cannot; nor have I ever grasped the thought, or ruling idea, of *Julius Caesar*. In any case, as time passes, the style becomes progressively (we must not say, in a straight line, for many of our dates are uncertain, but still becomes) stranger, darker, richer in vocabulary, more intricate in construction, and in metre not only freer, but at last so near to the patternless rhythm of prose, that we begin to tax the poet with some loss of respect for his instrument. This process has often been described. Dowden speaks of a 'preponderance or excess of the ideas over the means of giving them utterance', of the 'rapid and abrupt turnings of thought', and of the 'impatient activity of intellect and fancy' which cannot stop to work out an idea. But let me quote from the words, too little known save to students, of a young Aberdonian of a century ago. They occur in James Spalding's¹² *Letter on Shakespeare's Authorship of 'The Two Noble Kinsmen'*, in the course of a comparison with the style of John Fletcher:

He abounds in hinted descriptions, in sketches of imagery, in abrupt and vanishing snatches of fancy. . . . Everywhere his incessant activity and quickness, both of intellect and fancy, engaged him in a continual struggle with speech; it is a sluggish slave which he would force to a burden beyond its strength; a weary courser which he would urge at a speed to which it is unequal . . . it is the excess of strength which hurts, not weakness which incapacitates. . . . He has impressed no other of his own mental qualities on all his characters; this quality colours every one of them. It is one to which poetry is apt to give a very subordinate place. . . . Imagination is active, powerfully and unceasingly; but she is rebuked by the presence of a mightier influence; she is but the handmaid of the active and piercing intellect . . . crowding thoughts and fancies into the narrowest space, and submitting to obscurity in preference to feeble dilation.

We need but think of 'To be or not to be', or of Coriolanus at his angriest, to see the pertinence of this description. It covers, however, many differences and extremes of craftsmanship, from the recurring harshness of *Timon of Athens* to the unexcelled harmonies of *Antony and Cleopatra*; a play in which, as Sir Edmund Chambers remarks, we may feel that the balance between thought and expression is recovered. But there is certainly the further question: Trying to shun both pedantry and idolatry, what are we to *think* of this troubled way of writing? Is it not, again and again, simply bad?—not to be explained by any corruption in the text, or to be dramatically justified by any distraction or turbulence in the speaker. It is best to admit the regret. Quotation would be unpleasing; one can open, in *Coriolanus*,¹³ for instance, on twenty lines, made up of two sentences full of thorny grammar and confusions. To-day in every high school it is taught, and to every examiner the lament is proffered, that Shakespeare's blank metre, with its weightless line-endings, often tends to lose its pattern. These may be amongst the thousand things which Ben Jonson wished to have been blotted. I speak of course of cases where the text cannot reasonably be questioned. They are extreme instances of the new, intellectualized style which Shakespeare was led

to invent by his conception of heroic character, and of racking situation. We cannot decide whether, as some have guessed (knowing perhaps more about Shakespeare than did his maker) any disturbing personal experience lies behind his tragedies. Of course, and despite all excesses, this new style *is*, in general, supremely dramatic: the native and predestined expression of Lear on the heath, or of Timon with his gold; no need to emphasize its endless variety, or its ever-fresh revelations of the power of sound. Developed for the utterance of tragic discord, it becomes ever more close-packed, elliptical, and strange or difficult, not to say inharmonious. And yet, in one play at least, *Antony and Cleopatra*, there is a certain exultation of spirit, which begets a rhythm ever more buoyant and magical, and which derives directly from Shakespeare's transfiguring of the personages he found in his Plutarch. Few can feel in *Macbeth* or *Othello* that the ending leaves us with the sense that the chief actors have triumphed over their destiny. But in *Antony and Cleopatra* that impression is enforced by the very beat of the lines, by the fall of the changing pauses and by the peculiar soar of the language:

For his bounty,
There was no winter in't; an autumn 'twas
That grew the more by reaping: his delights
Were dolphin-like; they show'd his back above
The element they lived in: in his livery
Walk'd crowns and crownets, realms and islands were
As plates dropp'd from his pocket.

XII

This rich and uplifted style is prophetic; for, with its wildness tempered down, it is heard, with its unmistakable tune, in the Romances that were soon to follow. Upon these my limits forbid me to dwell; but I must mention one feature of them. Here, as we know, tragedy is merely threatened, and its logic is suspended; since the poet, for reasons that are hid from us, now prefers, as though by an arbitrary turn of the wrist, to stave off disaster, and to close

with a scene of unalloyed beauty; like that which released the spirit of the offending Ancient Mariner as he watched the water-snakes. Now in the *Winter's Tale* and in *Cymbeline* there is the definitely ethical element; there is free forgiveness, and oblivion of all errors. But, once, this element is absent, namely in Shakespeare's contribution to the play of *Pericles*. The scene is one of recognition, pure and simple, with no real *drama* behind it; as is the case in many a medieval romance, and in the tradition of the far-travelled story of Apollonius of Tyre. I would call this an example, not excelled, of Shakespeare's refreshed, and purged, and final style, now bare and now opulent, in which his most favoured technical resources are at easy command. *Pericles* lies in a stupor on the ship; and his daughter Marina, supposed to be lost, charms him awake and gradually reveals her identity. She has been bitterly tried, but has come out of the trials with dignity; she is a woman, not a young girl; and she begins in a weighty, even manner, with long words from the Latin, not unlike that of the English Histories:

Though wayward fortune did malign my state,
My derivation was from ancestors
Who stood equivalent with mighty kings . . .

Presently the pace quickens, the lines are freely divided between the speakers, and the words are of the easiest:

Mar. Patience, good sir,
Or here I'll cease.

Per. Nay, I'll be patient.
Thou little know'st how thou dost startle me
To call thyself Marina.

Mar. The name
Was given me by one that had some power;
My father, and a king.

But as the facts dawn upon *Pericles*, simplicity is not enough for him. As I said, the poet, at the height of an action, loves to personify—a process that in its nature carries the emotion beyond the occasion, and tends to

universalize it. Pericles can find no words for his daughter but to compare her to 'Patience gazing on kings' graves, and smiling Extremity out of act', or to 'a palace For the crown'd Truth to dwell in'. Yet the finale is plain again:

O, come hither,

Thou that beget'st him that did thee beget;

and, later:

Give me my robes. I am wild in my beholding.

Still but half-himself, he seems to hear heavenly music, and he concludes, 'Let me rest'. Thus the style that was originally inspired by the need of expressing tragic grandeur retains its virtue, and its actual movement, when adapted to express pure happiness.

Some one must have thought of the parallel before; but here another of the great recognition-scenes of literature comes to mind; I mean, in the *Electra*¹⁴ of Sophocles. True, the *Electra* is a tragedy of blood and retribution; but this is awhile forgotten in the inserted idyll. Orestes returns to avenge his father and to kill his murderess-mother and her partner. Electra had sent him away, while yet a boy, for safety. He has spread the report that he is dead; and he appears before her as a stranger, a grown man, carrying the urn that is supposed to hold his ashes. Here, as in *Pericles*, the disclosure is long and delicately led up to, so that the shock of happiness may not be sudden; here, too, grace and beauty rule, without loss of strength; and the words of Electra, when she knows the truth, are brief: 'What, art *thou* he?' and 'O voice, hast thou come?' and Orestes says, 'Let no other voice reply'. The art of Shakespeare and that of the antique, as is often said, can be near akin. I have assumed, as calling for no argument, that my hearers share in the semi-mystical view of style, indeed of all artistic creation, which I have implied throughout. Work which way you will, up from the dictionary, or downward from the poet's conception, the two processes can never meet; at the centre, there is always something

insoluble. You cannot combine the results of analysis by any nameable process of adding up, or of attempted fusion, and so explain what could never have been predicted. Philosophers have found the blessed word 'emergent' to indicate, or to disguise, their complete ignorance of the unknown factor, the x , which is implied in the transition from dead matter to life, or from life to mind. Perfect expression, too, is such an emergent; and to detect its secret would ask for a superhuman intelligence.

NOTES

¹ p. 3. *benefactors*. See list of the relevant works in Ebisch and Schücking's *S. Bibliography*, 1931, pp. 92-8. Besides the lexicons and glossaries (*O.E.D.*, Dyce, Schmidt, J. W. Cunliffe, and C. T. Onions), the grammars (Franz, Abbott), and Bartlett's *Complete Concordance*, the following will prove of special value for the study of Shakespeare's style: Henry Bradley, 'S.'s English', in *S.'s England*, 1916, ii. 539-74; Otto Jespersen, *Growth and Structure of the Eng. Language*, ed. 4, 1923, pp. 207-30, 'S. and the Language of Poetry'; George Gordon, *S.'s English*, tract no. xxix, for S.P.E., 1928. Also, for a more directly aesthetic treatment: George Ryland, 'S. the Poet', in *Companion to S. Studies*, 1934, pp. 89-115; J. W. Mackail, *The Approach to S.*, 1930, 1933, pp. 68, 133 ff.; Edmund Blunden, *S.'s Significances* (in *Lear*), 1929 (S. Association). Charles and Mary Cowden-Clarke's *Shakespeare Key*, 1879, an old-fashioned miscellany, has many hints of value, anticipating later studies (of elliptical speech, iteration of phrases, slang and cant terms, dramatic uses of silence, &c.).

² p. 4. *versification* (and prose). These are exhaustively discussed by Sir Edmund Chambers, *W.S.*, 2 vols., 1930, in their bearing on questions of revision, authenticity, date, &c.; but many of his comments bear directly on the poet's style and craft. See on the rapid alternations of verse and prose, and confusion between them, i. 182, 233, &c.; and on the evidences for date or order, as based on considerations of style, i. 253 ff. ('*subject-matter has its reaction upon style*' (my italics)). In deciding what is or is not an 'overflow', 'the elocutionary feeling must have the last word'. The 'verse-tests' (of which minute and often new statistics are given) are found to be chiefly of use, when determining authorship or sequence, as 'controls for the indications of external evidence' (i. 269 ff.).

³ p. 5. *A. C. Bradley*. As, for instance, in his paper on 'Mono-

syllabic Lines and Words in English Prose and Verse', in *A Miscellany*, 1929, pp. 245-67.

⁴ p. 5. *imagery*. See, too, the close vivid study by Miss Elizabeth Holmes, *Aspects of Elizabethan Imagery*, 1929, pp. 37-71. Also G. Wilson Knight, *The Shakespearean Tempest*, 1932 (storm-imagery as a *leitmotiv* recurrent in the plays), and other works on similar lines.

⁵ p. 9. *critic of language*. Miss G. D. Willcock's paper, 1934, is issued by the S. Association. See, too, one by the same writer on 'S. and Elizabethan English', in *Companion*, pp. 117-36.

⁶ p. 12. *De Quincey*. On 'Style'; *Works*, ed. 1842, x. 171. For passage on p. 5 *ante*, see on *Shakspeare*, in *Works*, xv. 83.

⁷ p. 12. *euphuism*. The evidence is marshalled by E. Warwick Bond, *Works of John Lyly*, 1902, i. 164-75.

⁸ p. 18. *images kindle one another*. See, besides Miss Spurgeon's book, E. Kellett, *Suggestions*, 1923, pp. 57-78, 'On a Feature of S.'s Style', where this point is admirably made.

⁹ p. 20. *Matthew Arnold*. Many references, e.g. in his second lecture *On Translating Homer*, given in 1861.

¹⁰ p. 21. *George Saintsbury*. 'S. and the Grand Style', in *Essays and Studies of the Eng. Association*, 1910, vol. i, pp. 113-35.

¹¹ p. 21. *Longinus on the Sublime*, ed. W. Rhys Roberts, 1899, ch. ix: ὕψος μεγαλοφροσύνης ἀπήχημα.

¹² p. 23. *Spalding*. Published in 1833, the paper was reprinted in N.S.S., series viii, no. 1, with *Life of Spalding* by J. Hill Burton (1876).

¹³ p. 24. *thorny grammar*. In *Coriolanus*, iv. vii. 35-53, speech of Aufidius: 'First he was A noble servant', &c.; and see the notes by Prof. R. H. Case in his 'Arden' edition of the play, 1922.

¹⁴ p. 27. *Electra of Sophocles*. I have used some words from Jebb's translation of ll. 1221, 1226.

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